

ARTICLE APPEARED
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4 August 1979**Books****Sideswipe****SIDESHOW: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia**

By William Shawcross.

Andre Deutsch. 467 pages. £6.95.

William Shawcross has spoiled what could have been a very good book and is, still, a highly readable and informative one. Here is investigative journalism of considerable competence about the American bombing in 1969 and subsequent invasion of Cambodia. On a subject that still divides many people, it is on the side of those, like the writer of these lines, who felt at the time that the invasion of Cambodia was, first, a strategic mistake in a war that was unlikely ever to be won and, second, a psychological mistake in an America where the war was quite evidently being lost.

But it is the manner in which it tells its message that is the weakness of this book. Its investigation is explicitly motivated by a desire to prove the case against, and then to condemn, the two people primarily responsible for the Indochina "sideshow" in Cambodia, President Nixon and Mr Henry Kissinger. The author says so at the beginning (the book is introduced as "in some ways a look at the foreign-policy side of Watergate") and then, in a diatribe thinly disguised as a conclusion, repeats it at the end.

Now it is one thing to conclude that Mr Nixon and Mr Kissinger pursued a wrong military strategy that was both to fail in its purpose and play a part in the eventual destruction of a supposedly neutral (though far from innocent) neighbour of Vietnam. Your reviewer would, personally, agree with that. It is another thing—a sleazy, distasteful one—to accuse a very brilliant, very fallible secretary of state of committing not "a mistake" but "a crime". This is not history, though it is clothed as such. It is propaganda. It has sold more copies of the author's book that way; it has made a name for him, notably in the United States. And in Europe it has prompted predictably fatuous comments from the likes of Lord Goronwy-Roberts that Mr Kissinger should never hold office again. But Mr Shawcross was, and perhaps will be, capable of better.

The parable he tells depends, to start with, on proving that Mr Nixon and Mr Kissinger pursued their Cambodian skull-

duggery through each of three phases: the secret bombing from 1969 of North Vietnamese supply lines and bases sheltering inside "neutral" Cambodia; Lon Nol's coup that toppled Prince Sihanouk from his Cambodian throne in March, 1970; and, a month later, the invasion of Cambodia. In fact, of course, the two men were indeed responsible for the bombing and the invasion. These were, in retrospect, to be military mistakes made, vainly, in the causes (fairly explained by the author) of aiding the Vietnamisation of the war and the withdrawal of American troops. Both the bombing and the invasion were aimed at blocking up a glorious North Vietnamese hide-hole.

But Mr Shawcross would like to be able to find his culprits guilty of the coup against Sihanouk as well. It would provide the third vital point of his forensic triangle. Indeed, he spends much of his eighth chapter developing the innuendo that there must have been good reason for his two White House Macbeths to do the deed—having admitted at the chapter's outset what any player or spectator in Washington knew at the time: that Henry Kissinger was evidently surprised by the fall of the maddening, but useful, Sihanouk, and appalled by its likely consequences. Both he and Mr Nixon were propelled by the logic of the event into supporting Lon Nol (and even into the invasion itself?) in a way they might otherwise have avoided.

This raises, next, the nature of Washington's bureaucratic machine. On this Mr Shawcross is either innocently or culpably misleading. There is a lot of sub-Woodstein investigation into wire-tapping without more than a nod towards the secretary of state's genuine outrage at the publication of the Pentagon papers, or the precedents he was following in over-reacting as he undoubtedly did. To make his wider point Mr Shawcross has valiantly pursued documents and sources, as a good journalist should. But he ignores—or at best does not assess—the fact that little of the mass of documentation addressed to a president, national security council chairman or secretary of state can possibly be seen or absorbed by them. Somewhere in Washington's specially wormy woodwork there is always a counter-recommendation, a campaign of contrary advice, an inter-departmental paper war. There flow night and day in

Washington great currents of paper that are either being dammed before they get to their sea, or being damned when they arrive, either being channelled away or being purposely or inadvertently ignored.

And there are moles, disenchanted courtiers who did not get their way or were slighted—and who leak their revenge to Mr Shawcross and others. There have been few more adept masters of this disunified bureaucratic empire than Mr Kissinger, few more ruthless in tracking what he wanted to find, in not seeing what he did not want to see, in not letting be seen what he did not want seen, few more traduced by moles, few, perhaps, who did not more deserve some of that traducing.

Mr Shawcross's evidence rests too heavily, however, on (deliberately?) not making these distinctions—on not distinguishing between low-grade documents and higher-grade ones; on not distinguishing between what this or that CIA agent in Indochina may have been reporting or instructed to do, and what major counsel was really being offered by the CIA inside the NSC; on not distinguishing between Kissinger suspicions overdone and Kissinger suspicions which, in the light of his own policy, were justified; on not distinguishing between what the disenchanted Mr Morton Halperin or Mr Melvin Laird did tell the author and what Mr Winston Lord or Mr Helmut Sonnenfeldt might have told him.

If Mr Shawcross is at his weakest when thus bolstering his harsh judgment of the motives of the men involved, he is at his strongest when detailing the perfidies of American policy and the sordid deceptions by the commanders on this Washington political battlefield when it came to achieving what Mr Nixon and Mr Kissinger wanted to achieve. He deals fully and fairly with the doctored records of the early bombing of Cambodia and produces an ironclad indictment of the American servicemen who betrayed their trust and violated a federal law in doing it, actions that should have brought more shame to America's armed forces than they have. Whatever the book's selection, of sources, its facts, taken in isolation,

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are largely accurate. The few errors—such as identifying Mr Robert Komer as a deputy ambassador to South Vietnam (though carrying the rank of ambassador, he was in fact a deputy to the military commander, a quite different being)—are minor even if they should have been avoided.

But a question cries out to be asked and answered. The furthest Mr Shawcross goes is to moot it. In a healthy system of adversary politics such as exists in the United States, when is it permissible, in the interests of coherent foreign-policy making, and when the enemy is totalitarian, to skirt or break the rules, or lead the game, a little or very illicitly, away from congress? And if the answer is "never", then when did it become so? After all, virtually every president in the 30 years before Mr Nixon had done it. It is a question Mr Kissinger himself has asked because, for all his vanity, he has the courage to do so. It is a question Mr Shawcross does not ask, one suspects, because it would fudge the clarity of his moral censures if he did.

And then there is a last question Mr Shawcross does not ask. Granted successive American presidents fought a mean, unpleasant war in Indochina. Granted they lost it. Granted, in this reviewer's opinion at the time, they should not have fought it precisely because, in the America of the 1960s and 1970s, they were bound to lose it. Does that mean that they, alone, were responsible for destroying that lovely country, Cambodia? Were they not honest at least in the intention of winning? And were there not other men of equal force, and with less need for constitutional scruple, on the other side doing all this and more, and for infinitely worse reasons: to conquer the Cambodians and subjugate them?

Try this for a final irony. Mr Shawcross is now, with great courage, leading a campaign to help the boat-people victims of the very same ruthless aggressors Mr Nixon and Mr Kissinger thought they might, if they behaved with equal ruthlessness in Washington and Indochina, stem—victims whose plight makes all of us who "opposed the war" wonder a bit whether history did, after all, prove us to be the ones who got it "right". Mr Shawcross's book is free of such questions, and free of answers too. It is too busy doing something else to be considered even remotely fair.